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EVALUATING TRANSFER APPLICATIONS.

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STUDIES OF ACHIEVEMENT OF TRANSFER STUDENTS HAVE SHOWN THAT THEY (1) EXPERIENCE AN APPRECIABLE DROP IN GRADES IN THEIR FIRST SEMESTER AFTER TRANSFER, (2) SUBSEQUENTLY RECOVER PART OR ALL OF THIS LOSS, (3) EARN LOWER TOTAL GRADE POINT AVERAGES THAN DO NATIVE STUDENTS, (4) EXPERIENCE GREATEST DIFFICULTY IN MATHEMATICALLY ORIENTED PROGRAMS AND AT MAJOR STATE UNIVERSITIES, (5) ARE LESS LIKELY THAN NATIVES TO GRADUATE, AND (6) TAKE LONGER TO GRADUATE THAN DO NATIVES. INSTITUTIONS ACCEPTING TRANSFER STUDENTS SHOULD (1) ANALYZE THEIR PAST EXPERIENCES WITH TRANSFER STUDENTS AS A BASIS FOR POLICY DETERMINATION, (2) REQUIRE A HIGHER PRETRANSFER GRADE POINT AVERAGE THAN THAT SET FOR PROBATION FOR NATIVE STUDENTS, (3) ACCEPT APPRECIABLY MORE TRANSFER STUDENTS THAN THEY EXPECT TO GRADUATE, (4) CONSIDER THE CONVERSION OF PRETRANSFER GRADES TO A COMMON BASE, THUS REDUCING THE EFFECT OF DIFFERENCES IN GRADING PRACTICES AT VARIOUS INSTITUTIONS, AND (5) INVESTIGATE THE USE OF ADDITIONAL MEASURES TO INCREASE THE EFFECTIVENESS OF PREDICTION OF TRANSFER STUDENT SUCCESS. (WO)

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Evaluating Transfer Applications*

JOHN R. HILLS

THE EVALUATION of the applications of transfer students should be a simple, straightforward process. Presumably, a transfer student has been tested by fire and found wanting or else has been tempered in the process. Probably it is only the researcher who complicates such a simple matter to the point that it is worthy of more detailed consideration. And we may as well, at the outset, draw the normal researcher's final conclusion—more research is needed. We draw that for the usual reasons, too. What has been done has not considered all aspects which need examination, and often the techniques used in earlier research were not adequate to permit the conclusions which were drawn. It is, of course, much easier to recognize this afterwards than beforehand.

Having inserted the researcher's caveat, let us recognize that the admissions officer has to admit or not admit whether or not the needed or correct research has been done, and let us see what help can be given him at this point in the history of higher education.

THE JUNIOR COLLEGE PROBLEM

In the first place the admissions officer has to be careful that he does not succumb to advertising. The most prominent advertising

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these days comes from the junior college movement, and perhaps the most succinct presentation of its point of view is expressed in the words of Martorana and Williams, "Almost invariably the group of junior college transfers considered has been found to do at least as well academically in the latter years at a higher institution as do students in the same fields who have spent all four years at the same institution."[1] I call this advertising because, like most promotional literature, it hides abundant evidence that its conclusion is not really sound. However, the promoters wish it was sound, and they want the world to believe that it is. The bases for promotion of junior colleges are not dishonorable, and to state them specifically may help the admissions officer to understand the efforts of the junior college promoters even as he refuses to accept completely their point of view.

One argument in favor of the junior college is that the junior college movement will democratize education. It is pretty hard to be against democratization, and none of us would willingly deny education to anyone. We are in the education business. But the supporter of junior-colleges-for-democracy realizes that if higher institutions do not accept all junior college graduates, or transfers, with open arms, students may decide not to go to junior colleges. If the junior colleges are without students, or serve only the weak students, the desired democratization does not take place. Therefore, regardless of its verifiable truth, this kind of democrat must promulgate the dogma that was expressed by Martorana and Williams—the junior college is just as good as anybody, perhaps even better, so let's build lots of them.

Many of the ardent supporters of junior colleges may be people who just can't help supporting the underdog. The very name "junior" puts this man on the side of two-year institutions. Underdogs often need and deserve support, and junior colleges need and deserve support at a much higher level than that to which they have been accustomed. But the admissions officer can't let the blind supporters of the underdog undermine his good judgment.

Related to the support argument is the belief that junior colleges are economical, and therefore they must be encouraged. To be selective among junior-college transfers is to discourage this economical form of education, and therefore it is equivalent to being opposed to sound principles of fiscal conservatism. Homer Babbidge's challenge

[1] S. V. Martorana and L. L. Williams "Academic Success of Junior College Transfers at the State College of Washington," *Junior College Journal*, 1954, 24, 402-415.

to the argument that junior colleges could provide education on the cheap[2] is well placed. He says, "The only *sure* way to save money in education is to reduce quality." We need proof that the same quality of education can be produced for less cost to the institution in a junior college than in a four-year college in these days of self-amortizing dormitories. If faculty of the same quality, laboratories of the same scope, and libraries of the same level are found in either institution, where will the economy take place in lower-division education? If quality faculty, good laboratories, and complete libraries are not necessary for good junior college education, then they should not be charged to the expense of lower division education at the four-year college. Education does not take place by magic— not even in a junior college.

If the advocate of junior-colleges-for-economy agrees that the same quality of education costs the institution the same amount in a junior or a senior college, but that it costs less to the student to attend a junior college because it may be near his home, permitting him to commute to the campus, then we are talking about a different kind of economy. In fact, we are merely saying that more colleges of any kind in a uniform geographical distribution will permit more people, of less financial means, to attend college. This is good because it provides our democracy with a better educated populace, and sound democracy is built on an informed electorate. But this is the same argument that we discussed before under the heading of the democratization of education. What is being advocated is not a saving of money, but a spreading of the opportunity for higher education. In fact, in gross, the spreading of junior colleges or other colleges to supply more people with the opportunity for higher education can only cost *more* money. No magic permits us to have more of this commodity at a lower total cost.

Some of the supporters of junior colleges can be discounted as nothing more than promoters of their own special vested interests. But we can detect and allow for the rooter for the home team.

Finally, some of the junior college support seems to be a bandwagon effect. This is the hot thing in education—"Even if we are wrong we are in good company." The layman, PTA member, is usually found in this group, and he can indeed be very influential in get-

[2] Homer Babbidge, Jr., "What Price Quality; Or, Economy, True or False?" *Junior College Journal*, 1962, 32, 427-431.

ting junior colleges built in abandoned air bases, in small towns without adequate junior college population, or in situations where it is hoped that a junior college can replace the payroll of an industry which has withered away and died.

What the admissions officer must remember when confronted by all the pressure from groups who want open admissions for transfer students based on arguments like those above, is that the basic premise in admitting any student to college is: only those shall be admitted who will benefit themselves or who will benefit the institution. No one should be admitted in order to aid an underdog, to promote democracy, to encourage economy, to help raise someone's pay or prestige, or to go along with the crowd. Nor should interinstitutional rivalries be permitted to influence admissions decisions!

RESEARCH ON TRANSFER STUDENTS

If a conscientious admissions officer is not going to flex before the wind of uninformed public opinion, he needs at least a reed to which to cling. There is a reed of research experience from the last few decades. It is no more than a reed because of the inadequacies mentioned earlier. Too often important aspects of the issue have been neglected in the studies which have been done, and too often the techniques employed in the studies have been naïve. The most frequent and most important single error seems to have been that when comparing transfer students with those who entered the four-year institution directly and remained until graduation, no allowance has been made for differences in scholastic aptitude of members of the two groups. Differences in performance between "natives" and transfers cannot clearly be attributed to inadequacies of the junior college unless inadequacies of the students themselves have been ruled out experimentally or statistically.

Still, since a reed is what we have, let's examine the reed. What does the bulk of the research say? To summarize briefly more than a score of studies conducted on students entering hundreds of colleges between 1910 and 1963, involving literally tens of thousands of students, the following can be concluded:

1. Students who enter junior colleges and transfer to four-year colleges typically experience an appreciable drop in college grades after transfer.
2. Usually the transfer's grades after transfer are lower than the average grades of the native students.

3. Often, but not always, the transfer's grades recover from the loss which occurs immediately after transfer, but the degree of recovery varies from a slight amount to complete recovery to their pretransfer level.

4. The transfer student seems to suffer most if he transfers into a curriculum which requires competence or training in mathematics, if he transfers into a major state university, or if he transfers from a junior college instead of from a four-year college.

5. The transfer will be less likely to survive to graduate than will the native student, on the average.

6. The transfer who does survive to graduate will probably take longer to reach graduation than will a comparable native student.

To summarize this picture conveniently, if not precisely, on the average we are making admissions decisions about risky students when we are dealing with transfer students.

Before continuing into a discussion of what provisions the admissions officer should make for such risks, be again reminded that this conclusion is a tentative one based on a lot of research over many years, but research with repeated weaknesses. Almost none of the studies in the literature used a sophisticated technique to be certain that transfer students were being compared with native students of equal academic aptitude. None of the studies has determined whether the differences between the performance of transfers and natives may be due primarily to certain more or less trivial things such as differences in grading standards between institutions and loss of credit upon transfer, or whether the differences are more basic, such as poor training in the junior college or pretransfer institution, lack of basic motivation toward a baccalaureate degree, socioeconomic differences between native students and transfers, etc. There is a lot that we still do not know in this area, but we do pretty well know the surface characteristics of the transfer situation. That is what we must operate with until we know more.

ADMISSION OF TRANSFER STUDENTS

What, then, are the implications for the admission of transfer students? First, to do a good job, the admissions officer must systematically accumulate experience in dealing with transfer students. This might be called research, but at least it is data collection and analysis. The sorts of data collection that are appropriate as a start are counting of the numbers of transfer students in various classifications: e.g.,

the number who transfer from each college, into each program, at each level of advanced standing. To go further, one could keep track of the average grades before and after transfer of students in each of these categories. He could also keep track of the number of transfer applications received, accepted, and actually entering in each category, and the number graduating and the length of time before graduation of transfers in each category. However, even before such data are available locally, there are some rules of thumb that may be sound enough for use.

First, generally if an institution wants transfer students who will not be likely to end up immediately on probation, it must plan to require a higher pretransfer average grade than the grade that it sets for probation for its students. The reason for this is the general finding that grades of transfer students drop precipitously immediately after transfer. It is as though the transfer student suffered from shock at the difference between institutions. The shock has been found to be as much as an entire letter grade (or more) in some cases: e.g., students formerly earning C's earn D's after transfer. Occasionally no shock is found. But until one knows otherwise in his own situation, he should allow about a half a letter grade for this effect. If a junior student must earn a C (2.0) to remain off probation, or if students must earn a C (2.0) average to graduate, transfers should have at least a C+ (2.5) before being accepted. Probably a little more difference, say 2.7, should be required for junior college transfers, and a little less, say 2.3, for transfers from four-year colleges. In a technical school, or for a technical curriculum, the grade-average requirement should perhaps be even greater. (At Georgia Tech the junior college transfer has been found to suffer a shock of a whole letter grade upon transfer.) The transfer average required should also be slightly exaggerated for the major state university's admissions office.

The second thing to take into consideration in admitting transfers is the institution's policy toward the total transfer situation. Some institutions are proud of the number of junior college or other transfer students which they eventually graduate. The state university in a state where junior colleges are prospering may feel that the university's good will and co-operativeness are underlined by a large volume of transfer students in its graduating groups. If that is the case, the

university's admissions officer must take in appreciably more transfer students than are expected to graduate. Among native students, those who survive the first two years are likely to graduate at a rate of about 80 to 85 per cent. However, among the junior college transfers, the rate will probably be found to be between one-half and 60 per cent. A rate like that will leave surprisingly little to be proud of on graduation day.

Still another way to handle the transfer shock problem is to lower the probation standards for transfer students for their first year in the receiving institution. That is, since we know that the transfer student typically suffers a severe and precipitous loss in performance immediately after transfer, and since we know that he often gradually recovers to some extent (sometimes completely), we could allow for this by setting different probation standards for transfer students from those set for natives. The transfer student might be permitted to obtain an average as low as D during his first year after transfer, while the native might be required to maintain the usual C.

Of course, in playing the reduced-probation-requirement strategy, one must keep in mind the graduation requirements. If a person transfers in as a beginning junior, usually his earlier grades are ignored in computing his graduation average. Then if he drops off to a D average during his junior year, he has only one year to bring it back to a C for graduation. That means he must maintain a B average during the hectic senior year. If he was only able to earn a D in his junior year, it is expecting a lot for him to average a B in the very next year. The transfer has a rough row to hoe! It is no wonder that great numbers of them fall by the wayside.

In order to improve upon these adjustments or allowances for transfers, it often seems reasonable to try to make specific additional allowances for transfers from particular institutions. To adjust to a common base the grade averages from each of the colleges which sends transfer students, a simple procedure is merely to collect for each separate sending college the grades of transfers before transfer and during the year after transfer. Determine the difference between pre- and posttransfer averages by subtracting the pretransfer average grade from the posttransfer average grade for each student, and getting the average of these differences for each college. For future transfers from each college subtract the average difference between

pre- and posttransfer grades for that college from the pretransfer average presented by a transfer applicant from the college in order to estimate his posttransfer performance.

For example, if Pottstown Junior College sends transfer students to Excelsior University, and if, on the average, the Pottstown JC transfer to Excelsior receives grades a half a letter grade lower after transfer to Excelsior, then to estimate the posttransfer performance at Excelsior of future Pottstown JC transfers, subtract one-half letter grade from their JC average grades. That simple procedure for adjusting grades of feeder colleges is about as good as any that does not involve the use of scores on tests of some kind.

Test scores combined with pretransfer grades will probably give multiple regression predictions of good accuracy, and in all likelihood those predictions will not be improved by any attempt to adjust the grade averages to a common base. However, adjusting the grades to a common base probably will not hurt prediction, either, and it may have a motivating effect on junior colleges. If they find that their students' averages must be reduced by half a letter grade in order to be properly evaluated, the junior colleges may be shamed into more academic rigor—and vigor. It may also help the student for him to know the hard facts of differences in grades.

SUMMARY

To summarize, what seems to be a simple problem, the evaluation of transfer applicants, has complicating subtleties which are systematically being denied by some segments of our society. Available data belie the ubiquitous denials. While those data, their analysis, and their interpretation are somewhat questionable, those data are currently our best guide for immediate practice. Until local data have been gathered, one is wise to treat the transfer applicant as a risky venture and make special allowances for him. Several kinds of allowances were suggested, including the raising of admissions standards, the lowering of probation standards, the adjusting of grades to a common base, and the use of test-scores and grades in transfer admissions.